

Independent Reviewer Guidelines

This document provides information on the review process, independent reviewer qualifications, and expectations for potential VAPG independent reviewers.

Review Process Overview

The VAPG application review process is governed by the Notice of Funding Availability (NOFA) and the program regulation 7 CFR 4284 Subpart J. Review responsibilities of all VAPG applications are divided between State Rural Development Offices, Independent Reviewers, and National Office.

- The State RD Offices are responsible for receiving all applications, determining eligibility, and ensure ensuring completeness of all submissions as required in the NOFA;
- The State RD Offices and Independent Reviewers are responsible for scoring eligible proposals (State offices only score applications from their state); and
- The National Office provides random quality checks of State eligibility determinations and independent reviewer scores and is responsible for recommending and approving final awards.

A successfully selected Independent Reviewer will be required to comply with the program's review requirements detailed in this Guideline. This includes no conflict of interest, compliance with confidentiality procedures, participation in a one-hour training, and other program-specific requirements to effectively assist in scoring eligible applications. You will work independently to evaluate and score four subjective criteria for each application and provide detailed justification for your scores. You will also be provided with materials on program requirements, evaluation criteria and instructions. National Office is available to answer your questions during this process.

Reviewer Qualifications

All VAPG Independent Reviewer candidates must meet the following minimum requirements:

- *Possess at least a bachelor's degree in one or more of the following fields: agribusiness, agricultural economics, agriculture, animal science, business, marketing, economics or finance.*
- *Have a minimum of 8 years of experience in an agriculture-related field (e.g. farming, marketing, consulting, or research; or as university faculty, trade association official or non-Federal government official in an agriculture-related field).*

Reviewer Requirements

Conflict of Interest

Individuals who are selected to serve as VAPG Independent Reviewers will be required to complete disclosure forms regarding potential conflicts of interest. These forms will be made available if you have been successfully selected based on qualifications.

Please Note: Conflict of interest policies, at a minimum, generally prohibit the following individuals from serving as Reviewers:

- Individuals who have applied for a VAPG grant this fiscal year.
- Individuals who have served as a grant writer or otherwise consulted on VAPG applications to be submitted in this round.
- Individuals who have a financial conflict-of-interest or whose particular circumstances are likely to raise the appearance of a financial conflict-of-interest, impropriety, or the appearance of impairment of objectivity with respect to any VAPG application they are asked to review or on which they are asked to comment.
- Individuals with any relationship to any organization or person applying for grant funds this fiscal year, including but not limited to the following: 1) any profit or nonprofit organization in which they serve as an officer, director, volunteer, trustee, general partner, or employee; or 2) Any person or organization with whom they are negotiating or have an arrangement concerning employment, including consultancy, or a past employer (within the last year); and 3) any family member or family-owned entity.
- Individuals having financial interests that are specifically contingent upon the selection of an application for the receipt of VAPG funds (including consulting fees, bonuses or prospective employment opportunities).

Confidentiality

Independent Reviewers must maintain strict standards of confidentiality as follows:

- Agree not to use any information obtained as a result of their participation as a reviewer for personal or private gain.
- Agree to maintain sole electronic or hard-copy access to the grant applications:
- Agree not have another party enter your comments or scores.

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- Agree to retain no copies of documents or parts of documents relative to this review, including notes or other documents that you create.
- Understand that your identity as a reviewer or specific application(s) will be kept confidential to the extent allowed by law.

Process

As an Independent Reviewer, you are expected to do the following:

- Have a working knowledge of the VAPG program requirements.
- Follow all Agency instructions regarding evaluation and scoring.
- Have access to a computer and the Internet and be able to communicate via email.
- Participate in mandatory one-hour teleconference/webinar training.
- Be able to access your assigned applications electronically.
- Evaluate assigned applications within the scheduled timeline.
- Document ALL scores with specific and detailed comments that justify/explain all assigned scores, whether high or low. Insufficient justification will result in the score sheet being returned to the reviewer and may jeopardize compensation to the reviewer.
- Adhere to conflict of interest/confidentiality requirements.
- Receive compensation via Electronic Funds Transfer

Compensation

USDA/RD offers the following compensation for this assignment in the form of an honorarium paid after satisfactory completion of the review process:

- \$100 for each eligible application review completed
- On average, each Independent Reviewer will typically complete 5-10 eligible applications

Period of Service

USDA/RD anticipates that Independent Reviewers will complete a one-hour mandatory training webinar during the period from January 15 to February 15. Then, Reviewers will complete application evaluations starting March 1 to April 1. On average, an application review takes 2 to 4 hours to complete.

How to Apply

To be considered, please submit your resume to: Cpgrants@wdc.usda.gov.

Thank you for your consideration and interest. If need further information, please contact Susan Horst at (202) 260-5952 or susan.horst@wdc.usda.gov